

Theme: Social Justice

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**Title of Paper: Perspectives on Democracy in E-Learning: A Case Study of National
Open University of Nigeria**

By

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Introduction

This paper intends to highlight the current efforts by the Nigerian government at adapting the use of modern facilities provided by the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the implementation of policies on education. It also aims at examining the use of electronic devices in the corporate governance of other sub-sectors of the State super-structure for a sustainable development.

What is Education?

Wikipedia free online dictionary says:

Education encompasses teaching and learning specific skills and something less tangible but more profound: the imparting of knowledge, positive judgment and well-developed wisdom. Education has as one of its fundamental aspects the imparting of culture from generation to generation. It means 'to draw out', facilitating realization of self-potential and latent talents of an individual.

Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1907-1987) sees education as the foundation for progress; the cornerstone for rapid economic, social and political development (Nigerian Tribune, 1983). Babatunde Fafunwa (2008) in a lecture titled: 'How to Revive Education Sector to Meet 21st Century Challenges' appears to concur with this definition when he emphasized the importance of education to national development. He submits:

For any meaningful and sustainable national development, education must be given a priority attention. A nation that expects to develop in spite of its illiterate masses expects what never was, and never shall be (The Guardian, Thursday, January 3, 2008).

The UNESCO recommends that developing nations should not commit less than 26% of total annual budget to education sector if they are to cope with the millennium challenges of globalization. In line with this objective, Aliyu Babatunde Fafunwa (ibid.) posits:

If we Nigerians are to achieve our goal, we will have to place education into the mainstream of economic, social and cultural development. For it seems inescapable that no major industrial revolution can either take place or be sustained, no new society can be built or maintained in a country where the masses are still held down largely by ignorance, disease and poverty.

What is ODL?

Year 2002 marked the advent of the GSM revolution in Nigeria with cybernetic languages such as **e-government, e-banking, e-education, e-passport, e-voting, e-commerce**, etc. Cybernetics is defined by the Encarta Microsoft Dictionary (2003) as the study of automatic control systems; the science or study of communication in organisms, organic processes, and mechanical or electronic systems. Thus, the application of any mechanical or electronic device, most especially computers, in governance or service delivery makes the activity takes the prefix of letter (e-) to connote its electronic nature.

In Open and Distance Learning, students take academic courses by accessing information and communicating with the instructors/facilitators at different times from different locations over a computer network. It can also be an education or training from a remote teaching site via electronic media. This ranges from the traditional correspondence courses, on-line provision and interactive CD ROMS, where a significant element of *flexibility, self-study and learning support* are integral to the system.

ODL has brought education out of the paradox of the vectors of access, quality and cost constraining its impacts throughout history. Education has been wrongly assumed by most public policy formulators and implicitly, by the public to be a zero-sum game between these variables. Based on this hypothesis, it is inferred that increasing access to education will lower quality and raise overall cost. Similarly, raising quality will increase cost and therefore reduce access.

This has created in the public mind a sinister link between quality, access and cost in education. However, the greatest achievement of the ODL has been the break of this menacing link. There is now valid evidence that appropriate use of e-Learning allows for increased accessibility, improved quality and cost minimization - all at the same time. This is an educational revolution with the potential dramatically to accelerate the development that will enhance the freedom of the mass of humankind.

Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria

The idea of ODL in Nigeria was first conceived in 1981 by the civilian administration of President Sheu Shagari but the military aborted the project in 1983. In the year 2002, President Olusegun Obasanjo exhumed the project file and enacted a law through the National Assembly to establish what is now known as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The institution delivers education to learners, using Internet-based and multimedia technologies without necessarily seeing the four walls of a classroom - a '*Global Classroom*', that is. The aim of the government is to give a greater number of Nigerians a greater access to tertiary education without tears. However, despite the upsurge in the number of institutions of higher learning, the expected succor is yet to be brought to the teeming masses of Nigerians yearning for University education. With the neo-liberal policies maintained by the new generation of universities in the area tuition fees, it has taken education out of the reach of the economically challenged Nigerians who constitute the majority.

In 2007, President Umaru Yar'Adua reframed the manifesto of his party, abridging it into what he termed a 7-point Agenda: *Education, Transportation, Food Security, Land Reforms, Power and Energy, National Security and Wealth Creation*, adopted as the directive principle of his administration's policies, aimed at making Nigeria achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). It is a fact that for any meaningful development to take place education must be given the topmost priority being the bedrock of human life. A lesson in Social Psychology teaches that man is born a *tabular rasa* (blank brain) until he begins to respond to the environmental stimuli to acquire the natural instincts and Intelligence Quotient (IQ). This corroborates the view of Will Durant (1885-1981), a US author and historian that "education is a progressive discovery of our ignorance."

Unfortunately, the best of the efforts put into the education sector by the successive Federal Government since independence has not been good enough in spite of the abundant resources available. Otherwise, Nigeria would not remain in the club of nations with a high ratio of illiteracy. Less than 50% of the estimated 140 million Nigerians are educated, this is in sharp contrast to her contemporaries in the Asian and Latin American countries where, in most cases, the literacy level is over 75%. There has been a running battle between the Nigerian government, the academic unions and other stakeholders in the education sector since the late 70s when there was a policy shift by the Obasanjo military regime over the ownership, funding and management of public schools. Up to the present time, the relationship between the government and the stakeholders in the nation's education sector is frosty and the cause of disagreement remains poor funding, among other backlog of contentious issues.

But as a practical demonstration of his determination to revamp the education sector, thereby making it a catalyst for social engineering for national development, former President Umaru Yar'Adua appropriated a sum of ₦210 billion or 13% of the 2009 budget to education. Although, that was a watershed in the

budgetary history to the sector, it is short from 26% recommended by UNESCO. Consequently, the drive for internally generated revenue becomes imperative which has been responsible for instability in the sector. For instance, a coalition of students of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH) and Osun State University (UNIOSUN) issued a warning that there would be violence unless the hiked school fees in both varsities were reviewed (The Nation, Thursday, January 10, 2008). The coalition leader, Mr. Adogun Jelili stated that the minimum school fees charged by LAUTECH was ₦55,000 while that of the UNIOSUN was ₦180,000. The new tuition fees regime at the Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU) has sent many tongues wagging against the authority. Late 2008, the students of Ahmadu Bello University, (ABU) Zaria took to the streets in violent demonstration against hike in school fees, which led to the closure of the School. The students bemoaned the plight of their poor parents most of whom have more than one child in higher institution and other responsibilities to shoulder. They submit:

...so, the growing commercialized and privatized educational system forces students to spend, in most cases, an average of ₦400,000 yearly. Majority of youths who cannot afford it are left out of tertiary education... (The Nation, *ibid.* p.25)

The prohibitive tuition fees being introduced by the conventional universities in the country makes it imperative for the Federal Government to further strengthen the frontiers of Open and Distance Learning to encourage Nigerians to tap into the opportunities of the system to meet the target of 'education for all by the year 2015'. The ODL is favoured for its elasticity at coping with the demand pressure in the education sector and one of the demand-pull factors is the policy of "no higher certificate, no promotion" to officers in the military and paramilitary organizations to enhance their professional performance. It is also binding on Nurses and Midwives **who are** yet to obtain B.Sc. Degree in Nursing.

This explains why about 80% of NOUN students nationwide are from this category of working classes. The flexibility in terms of programs and admission policy, cost effectiveness and comparatively stable academic calendar of Open and Distance education make it a better option for those who are desirous of acquiring university education without necessarily losing their jobs. A random sampling of the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) statistics for the year 2002 - 2004 shows a yawning gap between the percentages of the applicants and the admitted candidates during the year under study.

Democracy at NOUN

The birth of the NOUN could not have come at a more appropriate time when bastardization and denigration of University degrees through the notorious '*kalokalo gaming centres*' that was the outreach or satellite campuses illegally run by most Nigerian Universities where 'academic degrees' were obtained but not earned. It got to a stage when employers of labour and higher institutions of learning abroad started to be wary of degree certificates emanated from the Nigerian University system. A big relief that

the hitherto extorted and exploited Nigerians have now found solace in the National Open University of Nigeria that has come to make Nigeria's millennium goal on education a reality. The broad objectives of the National Open University of Nigeria are to:

- Enhanced capacity building;
- Reach target groups with limited access to conventional education and training;
- Support and enhance the quality and relevance of existing educational structures;
- Promote innovation and opportunities for lifelong learning through a less regimented system.

Democratic education begins with freedom and respect for young people and this approach to teaching and learning has attracted a surge of interest since the 1990s, leading to the creation of new democratic schools throughout the world (Dana Bennis & Isaac Graves). The personalized and dynamic nature of democratic education makes it difficult to define. There is no "accepted" definition of what exactly democratic education means. However, it might help to provide a brief description of what it is not as well as varying perspectives on what it is. Democratic education does not refer to an authoritarian approach involving a hierarchical structure and pre-determined course-work designed to create "citizens of a democracy." Such an interpretation is taken by, among others, University of Pennsylvania President Amy Gutmann in her book entitled *Democratic Education* (1999). While Gutmann uses the term "democratic education" to describe the end goal of a mostly pre-planned, authoritarian form of schooling, we believe that democracy and freedom ought to be both the end-result of education as well as the means through which education takes place. This, in essence, means:

- Adhering to human rights within the school framework,
- Operating school life based on democratic procedures (Institute for Democratic Education, 2006:1).

Describing these democratic procedures a little further, Sudbury Valley School, one of the oldest running democratic schools in the United States, mentions the following three characteristics:

- Individual rights,
- Political democracy,
- Equal opportunity (*The Crisis in American Education*, 1970).

Matt Hern, director of the Purple Thistle Centre, an alternative to school project in Vancouver, British Columbia, described nine characteristics of democratic schools in his book *Field Day*, which include:

- non-compulsory academics,
- self-regulation,
- non-compulsory attendance,
- non-hierarchy of activities,
- broad interpretations of learning (pp. 177-178).

Democracy is a system in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly or through elected representatives. Democracy is a set of ideas and principles about freedom based on a set of practices and procedures that molded through a long and often tortuous history. The fulcrum of democracy is the institutionalization of freedom and for this reason, it is possible to identify the time-tested fundamentals of constitutional government, human rights, and equality before the law that any human society must possess to be qualified as a democracy.

However, since the theme of this paper is to examine the extent to which democracy is congruent to open and distance learning or to look at its operations with a view to identifying elements of democracy, which differentiate the system from the conventional pedagogical methods. However, classical definition of democracy may not be appropriate since the contention here is not about the State or the people, neither is it about the struggle for power among the elites. Rather, it is about individual rights to freedom of choice and personal liberty, which are the core or hardware of democracy as imbued in the doctrine of the *Rule of Law* under a popularly elected government as distinctive from democratic software, defined as good governance that is regarded as primary responsibility of any government whether democratic or not.

The industrialized model of distance education first advanced by Peters (1983) accurately identified the nature of the operation that, through its ability to fulfill large-scale educational plans in the most cost effective way, made it very attractive for governmental planning. According to Alan Tait (1988), the Peking Television and Radio University has approximately 1,000,000 students, while the Sukhothai Thammarat Open University, Thailand, has some 350,000 students.' The British Open University has over 75,000 degree level students. In Nigeria, according to Olugbemi Jegede (2009), the student population of the nation's Open University is estimated to about 100,000, spread across the 37 Study Centres in the country. These are massive educational undertakings initiated by central governments in order to increase access and opportunity to a far wider range of people and to meet national needs. Therefore, it is not out of place while discussing a gigantic educational project of this nature to relate it to the political systems of the countries concerned, and in terms of popular participation to refer to the concept of democracy.

The importance of distance education in providing opportunity is associated in many instances with the word 'open' and indeed, the characteristics of openness, which are widely important, include:

- Flexible admission policy to those who wish to apply; no mandatory qualifying examination for candidates in Nigeria. There is concessional admission based on age, experience in public service, etc.
- The home-based nature of study, together with the expectation that the part-time mode will be available, allows much wider access.

- The opportunity in some institutions to enroll and start at any time, without a waiting period also increases access.
- Students can combine work with learning without the hysteria or emotional instability arising from geographical movement capable of disrupting the academic programme, in a conventional system suggests a freedom of choice obtainable in a multiparty and pluralistic democracy.
- The possibility of using ICT facilities by students to interact with their facilitators at any time of the day, give students a sense of value and importance.

The above characteristics potentially allow people to gain access to education on a greater scale than ever before, with fewer of the barriers of geography, class or gender. In other words, educational opportunity is more democratically available through distance learning than through other conventional methods.

Education and Democracy

Although, most states have abolished educational requirements and even literacy tests for voting, until 1948 holders of a University degree in Britain had an extra vote and a few American states still have literacy requirements (Leeds, 1981: 176). This has been considered necessary in order that the voter can inform himself of all issues, which might help him decide how to vote. It must be stated that educated citizens are not necessarily the 'best' ones, but effective government certainly needs well-informed citizens. Political benefits including political participation, expansion of democracy, ethnic equality and amelioration of post-conflict situations: Participation in adult literacy programmes is correlated with increased participation in trade unions, community action and national political life, especially when empowerment is at the core of programme design (e.g. Carron et al., 1989). However, the precise nature of the relationship between education and democracy remains unclear and difficult to measure accurately (Hannum and Buchmann, 2003).

The conventional wisdom, since at least the writings of John Dewey (1916), views high levels of educational attainment as a prerequisite for democracy. Education is argued to promote democracy both because it enables a "culture of democracy" to develop, and because it leads to greater prosperity, which is also thought to cause political development. The most celebrated version of this argument is modernization theory, which was popularized by Seymour Martin Lipset (1959:79-80), it emphasizes the role of education as well as economic growth in promoting political development in general and democracy in particular. He argues:

Education presumably broadens men's outlooks, enables them to understand the need for norms of tolerance, restrains them from adhering to extremist and monistic doctrines, and increases their capacity to make rational electoral choices.

S.65 (2)(a) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitution, 1999 (as amended) states thus:

A person shall be qualified for election under subsection (1) of the section if he/she has been educated up to at least School Certificate level or its equivalent.

Although, setting educational requirement is a paradox liberal democracy because it tends to violate the political right (*franchise*) of the uneducated citizens. Given the level of sophistication of modern democracy, what idea could an unlettered person postulate? Uneducated leaders will only make a mockery of the system, as was the case in Nigeria's Second Republic when Alhaji Bakin Zuwo, governor of Kano State gleefully defined the mineral resources available in his State as 'Fanta' and 'SenaCola' while responding to a reporter's question! He was also alleged to have kept millions of State's funds in his house instead of a Bank.

CONCLUSION

The importance of highly educated and well-informed citizenry cannot be overemphasized for the survival of democracy, social justice and liberty. Little wonder, then that the travails of democracy and the rule of law in Nigeria is attributable to low literacy level thus, giving the political class the leverage to exploit the situation by resorting to base primordial sentiments to achieve some selfish objectives. Why has the military not interfered in the political process in India like Nigeria, despite her political crises that claim the lives of many Prime Ministers in the country? The answer is not far to fetch - high literacy level of India has been the stabilizing force, despite her multiplicity of ethnicity, religion, creed, intimidating population and landmass. I submit as follows:

- That the dissemination model of knowledge is highly influential in distance education
- Because of the scale of operation of distance education institutions and their closeness to direct governmental planning, it is appropriate to examine their political characteristics.
- That tuition and counseling in distance education and open learning, acting to individualize the mass product, have an essential role, which at the micro level accords with notions of adult status for adult learners, and at the broadest level is supportive of democratic educational practice.

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